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ABSTRACT

This guide is the seventh in a series of eleven generated in 1978 as the result of workshops that focused on peer training, a different approach to teaching. The workshops provided the opportunity for members of eleven identified role groups to work together with peers to examine the relationship between their specific role group and community education and the ways in which they could stimulate their peers to improve role performance and effectiveness. This booklet focuses on community education as seen by community educators who work with people with special needs, such as the mentally and physically disabled, prison inmates, and the institutionalized. Topics considered include responsibilities of the community educator, relationships with special needs populations, and development and implementation of a program. (Author/LD)

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# SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATION AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Role Guide Series #7

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—South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind

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Special Needs Population

and

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## PREFACE

This booklet is a result of two three-day Role Training and Peer Interaction Academies which were held in 1978 and funded by a training grant from the U.S. Office of Education, Community Education Program. The format for both Academies was designed to focus upon peer training, a method which has proven to be a useful teaching and information sharing approach. The sessions provided the opportunity for members of eleven identified role groups to work together with peers to examine in-depth:

a) the relationship between their specific role group and community education, and

b) the ways in which they could stimulate their peers to improve role performance and effectiveness.

Material development phases were interwoven with both structured and unstructured problem-solving activities. The follow-up activities and publications of the Role Guide Series were made possible from grants by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Through a sharing of information, all participants gained knowledge. The information shared in this booklet is intended for use both by experienced individuals and those just entering the field. The booklet can help the experienced individual to become more aware of additional aspects of the role and of directions being taken by others. It can assist the novice in gaining an overview of the role as seen by those who have worked in this capacity. The information also can be used as a means for guiding others in the community to gain a better understanding of the role and its relationship to community education.

AS SPECIAL NEEDS REPRESENTATIVES, WE BELIEVE

We believe that community education is a process of promoting mutual awareness of special strengths and needs of each individual and of utilizing these strengths and all available resources to develop a community environment of people helping people.

We believe that we live in a democratic society where all people who have the desire to do so can, and should be, active participants in the society.

We believe that many more disabled people are becoming active participants.

We believe the community education philosophy includes service to all people in a community.

We believe that the community education process should be able to implement a holistic community approach which encompasses the needs of any individual without stigmas, thereby, creating a more interactive and interdependent community.

We believe that the responsibility to aid in this endeavor lies with each of us.

## INTRODUCTION

The special needs population is defined as that population composed of individuals whose physical or social functions are somehow impaired or restricted. It includes individuals who are: physically disabled, mentally disabled, sensory disabled (blind/visually impaired, speech impaired and hearing impaired), learning disabled, and the socially impaired (prison inmates, senile individuals, disruptive youths, institutionalized individuals).

In examining the relationship of community education to the special needs population, the role group used the following definition:

> Community education is a process which promotes the development of a comprehensive and coordinated delivery system of educational, recreational, social, and cultural services for all individuals in a community and provides an opportunity for people to work together to achieve self-improvement in an interacting and interdependent community.

The role of the community educator is perceived as that of being a change agent - a person who stimulates the total community to an awareness of the needs of each segment and of potential approaches to fulfilling identified needs. The major goal is to facilitate attitudinal change, growth, and understanding within and among the total service area.

Because, historically, individuals comprising the special needs population have been segregated apart from the community, the participants at the two Role Training and Peer Academies carefully examined the role of the community educator. They agreed that in order for a community educator to work successfully with the special needs population group, his/her actions and reactions must reflect

the acceptance of a basic assumption. This assumption is that the special needs of people, whose physical or social functioning happens to be impaired due to some circumstance, should not prevent them from living effective and productive lives as integral parts of the community.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

Labeling has been one of the problems of the special needs population and the "normal" population has often reacted to the label rather than to the specific impairment or restriction of the individual. The major responsibility of community education personnel who work with people with special needs is that of promoting a positive change in behavior and in perception of the limits of impairment. This change usually should take place both in the special needs community and in the community at large.

It is the tendency of many people to question or even fear something new or unknown. Many people have misconceptions that are related to a lack of awareness or to inaccurate perceptions. The responsibility of the community educator is to utilize all available institutions, organizations, individuals, and other community resources to increase awareness and promote realistic attitudes and perceptions. Understanding the problems of the special needs population in both the cognitive and affective domains will establish an enabling environment and an atmosphere of acceptance. The community educator should be aware that change is not only necessary on the part of the community at large, but also on the part of members of the special needs population. In many cases, members of the special needs segments of the community have developed a belief that they are not accepted as part of the total community. Thus, by their actions and reactions, they have isolated themselves and have resisted developing relationships which would involve them with the total community.

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

The community educator, as a responsible change agent, always must be aware that he/she works WITH people so as to enable them to change and to grow to their fullest potential. The community educator should encourage people with special needs to help fulfill the needs of others in the community. At the same time, he/she also must serve as an advocate of people with special needs and should help them to articulate their needs. Self-esteem develops when an attitude of working with, rather than for a person with special needs is practiced. Consequently, a sense of empathy, not sympathy, is vital in community educators.

The most important basic characteristics, competencies, and/or abilities of a community educator working with the special needs population can be categorized into two areas: management skills and personal characteristics. The following management skills are needed:

- Team building
- Organization
- Communication (including sign language skills if working with the deaf or braille skills with the blind)
- Time management
- Decision making
- Assessment/evaluation

The following personal characteristics are desirable:

- Confident and positive behavior
- Realistic attitudes
- Commitment
- Empathy
- Enthusiasm
- Humor
- Flexibility

- Creativity
- Good interpersonal relationships

The selection of an individual to work with the special needs population should be based on the degree to which these skills and characteristics are possessed and the degree of professionalism displayed. It is an individual's competencies which are important, not his/her academic degrees or other such credentials.

## DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES

Recognizing that the community education effort of a specific community is comprised of many programs and agencies serving people, strategies must be developed to involve the special needs population in everything that is happening in community education. These strategies must be aimed at insuring a partnership of both learners and helpers working together to develop a community where no person is excluded.

To develop and implement a plan for the involvement of the special needs population, it is necessary first to conduct a needs assessment which involves the community. It is essential to develop a strong support base within the community. Awareness sessions should be held which are designed to increase awareness and understanding of the assessment results and, when/where necessary, to educate the public and those involved concerning the special needs population and their programming needs. Another key is the development of an active and enthusiastic advisory council to aid in need identification and prioritization, resource identification, and program evaluation.

Strategies also are necessary in the areas of securing adequate funding for a program, identifying resources, disseminating information, and coordinating programming with the community. The elements of linking, pooling, idea planting, recognition, and utilization of the demand population in the program

are essential ingredients in the implementation of community education programs.

Once a community education effort to involve the special needs population has been initiated, the community educator should continue to:

- Provide information to the citizenry to expand awareness
- Create a demand for knowledge about special needs populations
- Recruit and train volunteers from the citizenry
- Monitor and evaluate the programming

In the area of interagency coordination, the community educator should provide information and referrals and should act as a clearinghouse for agencies. He/she also should assist in interagency cooperative development and serve as a needs assessor in the areas of program development. The community educator should continue to provide advocacy for the special needs population to the appropriate funding sources, to develop proposals that will enable accessibility to programming, to utilize civic and business organizations for specific projects, and to arrange for budgeting within his/her own agency so that the program becomes an integral part of the agency.

## PROBLEMS

Major problems encountered by community educators working with the special needs population often include: lack of awareness, apathy, fear of the unknown, stigmas or rigid mind sets attached to the special needs population, and hostility due to the fact that community education sometimes ignores this population. Additional problems are encountered when agencies and programs have policies, rules, regulations, or other impediments to their flexibility in serving people with special needs.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A future direction for community education is to follow through on what the word "community" means. Each and every individual in a community must have his/her needs and desires considered and have the opportunity to be involved directly or indirectly in the planning and program development to fulfill the needs and desires of the total community.

In order to achieve a total sense of community, a community education effort must incorporate a strong commitment to the special needs population existing in any community. The commitment includes resource identification, awareness programs, and educational and recreational programming. Community educators should assist those in the role of service providers to expand service where needed and to eliminate duplication of effort and programs.

There is also a need for a long-range plan to affect positively the birth-to-death attitudes among all community members. A positive, realistic birth-to-death attitude leads to an acceptance of each individual in the community as an integral

part of the total community. Community education will be successful in serving the special needs population when the following types of activities become commonplace in community life:

- Individuals with special needs are recognized as persons with special talents and skills and are utilized in the community
- Individuals with special needs are aware of and have ready access to the community resources available to them
- A deaf person goes to the doctor and is able to communicate with him/her in sign language directly or through an interpreter
- A blind person may read the department store directory in braille
- Members of the aged population have many opportunities to provide their services in situations where they can be productive and are respected

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